



What Happens After Elections



President Barack Obama, left, and former President George W. Bush sing the national anthem after Obama was sworn in to office January 20, 2009. ©AP Images.

With the votes still being counted on November 4, 2008, the two leading candidates for the U.S. presidency played their roles in the concluding act of an established political drama. The first to speak was the defeated candidate, John McCain.

His concession speech followed a time-honored tradition. “My friends, we have come to the end of a long journey. The American people have spoken, and they have spoken clearly. A little while ago, I had the honor of calling Senator Barack Obama to congratulate him ... on being elected the next

president of the country that we both love ... Senator Obama and I have had and argued our differences, and he has prevailed. No doubt many of those differences remain. These are difficult times for our country, and I pledge to him tonight to do all in my power to help him lead us through the many challenges we face.”

In his victory speech, Barack Obama responded, emphasizing “that we have never been just a collection of individuals or a collection of red [predominantly Republican] states and blue [predominantly Democratic] states. We are, and always will be, the

On election night in November 2008, defeated Republican candidate John McCain — his wife by his side — concedes the election to his Democratic opponent, Barack Obama. ©AP Images.



United States of America.” The president-elect’s next words offered a tribute to his rival: “A little bit earlier this evening, I received an extraordinarily gracious call from Senator McCain. Senator McCain fought long and hard in this campaign. And he’s fought even longer and harder for the country that he loves. He has endured sacrifices for America that most of us cannot begin to imagine. We are better off for the service rendered by this brave and selfless leader.”

Legitimate Transitions

The transition process begins with the defeated candidate’s concession speech. These remarks play a crucial role: the defeated candidate accepts the legitimacy of the election results, even as he renews his party’s commitment to future victory. Delivered with a minimum of preparation by a strong personality at a time of great emotional stress, a concession speech reinforces the nation’s commitment to social stability and legitimate political authority.

Soon afterward the victorious candidate delivers a speech acknowledging his opponent’s graciousness. His response signals that supporters of all candidates remain a valued part of the national polity. Each election, no matter how bitterly contested, thus ends with an expression of national unity.

U.S. elections are fought hard. Yet citizens expect that elections will be fair and the results respected, with a peaceful transition of power from one leader to the next. That is so not only for the presidency, but

also for elections to Congress, for state governors and legislatures, and for local elections.

Citizens accept disappointing election results when they understand that the laws are being enforced fairly and that their views may prevail in a subsequent contest. Election results are accepted when citizens view their government as legitimate because it obeys the rule of law.

Challenging Transitions

During the roughly 75-day period between election and inauguration of a new U.S. president, the outgoing administration briefs its successor on important national security, foreign affairs and other matters. This empowers the new president to make informed decisions upon taking office. It also helps the president-elect make personnel decisions about top-level officials. A new president fills about 7,000 executive branch positions; the 1,200 most important ones — including the secretaries of state and defense — require Senate confirmation.

Transitions challenge any political system. In healthy democracies, fair elections and peaceful transitions demonstrate that today’s losers might be tomorrow’s winners. Winners and their supporters must remain responsive to the opinions of their rivals, keeping an eye on the next election cycle.

Losers and their advocates can focus on present and future possibilities, rather than past resentments. Confident that the rules can work for them next time, they more easily accept the existing political order and do not resort to violence. Officeholders who lose elections relinquish power gracefully and peacefully. By doing so, they can emerge with their dignity intact and through their example strengthen their nation’s democratic traditions. Likewise, by reaching out to and showing respect for their political opponents, winning candidates help bridge differences and minimize the potential for conflict that can undermine democracy.

Inauguration Day 1933: President Herbert Hoover (left), a Republican, shakes the hand of President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Democrat who defeated Hoover’s 1932 re-election bid. ©AP Images.

